

## Andrew Jackson Donelson, November 10, 1830, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

### STATEMENT OF ANDREW J. DONELSON.<sup>1</sup>

1 Copy. Jackson MSS., Presidential Messages and Misc., Box D. In the handwriting of A. J. Donelson.

Washington, November 10, 1830.

On this day about 12 oclock the President remarked to me that he had received my note of yesterday in relation to the difficulties which opposed the return of Mrs. Donelson to the city of Washington. The views which he took of that subject were so extraordinary and indicate so firm a determination to hold the members of his cabinet as well as myself who had not coerced their families into an intercourse with Mrs. Eaton, officially responsible to him, that I have felt it due to myself hereafter to reduce to writing what passes as leading to this object.

Tho well aware from the moment of the organization of the cabinet that the repugnance of society to recognize Mrs. Eaton as a proper associate would deeply affect the feelings of the President and expose his excitements to the arts of office seekers and to the many biasses which must naturally attend the incorporation of private feelings with the action of the Government, yet I relied upon the checks, which, an overruling sense of justice, the tendency of time and good counsels, and the inherent weakness of such combinations contained, to dispel the delusion, and ultimately redeem the administration from the odium of such a feature. This anticipation has been banished by the conversation which the President held with me to day. An infatuation kept alive by the timidity of weak friends

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and the interests of the political party which have used Majr Eaton as an instrument first to obtain the confidence of the President and afterwards to controul him, has long since classed those who associated with Mrs. Eaton or who countenanced her pretensions to virtue and innocence, as the confidential friends of the President, and those who did not as secretly favoring the views of an opposition to his fame and character. The circumstances which ought to have removed this infatuation have confirmed it. It has now become a principle of the administration, and as such consigns to destruction those who do not subscribe to the means which are necessary to secure it power.

Independently of the importance of the subject in this point of view, it is more so to me individually, in another. My relation to the President as his private secretary, the object of his early favor and care, and but for this impediment the sharer with his adopted son of his estate—this and all the influences which it sets in motion calculated on the one hand to enjoin obedience, forbearance, conciliation, love and gratitude, as my duty; and on the other, opposite and corresponding vices or faults as the just measure of my character, if my agency in this event seperates me from his person; are considerations of the deepest import to my future happiness. That the world may know that they have been justly appreciated—that if I am borne down as others are by this evil tide, neither my honor, my character, nor my duties are sunk beneath it, by whatever standard they may be estimated, I have yielded to the necessity of preserving up to this period some evidences of my conduct in relation to the attempts of Mrs. Eaton to subdue the moral sentiment of society, which will be found in another part of this book. The same necessity has also induced me to reduce to writing the conversations which I hold with the President; and I commence with that of this day.

The following letter was before him dated 9th Nov. 1830

*My Dear Uncle* , Understanding you in that part of our conversation last evening relating to the return of Mrs. Donelson to this city, to say, that I must not anticipate this happiness until I could consent to her visiting Mrs. Eaton, or in other words would coerce an

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intercourse between Mrs. Eaton and Mrs. Donelson, out of your house as well as in it, as far as the latter was concerned, it becomes my painful duty to apprise you again that such terms cannot receive my approbation.

If I have misconceived your meaning, pray, let me know what are the difficulties which I have to remove before my family can be allowed to occupy the same house that I do.

yr. grateful and affectionate nephew.

P. S. I do not wish another correspondence on the subject—all that I desire is the knowledge of your wishes in relation to the extent of the intercourse in question, that I may be able to be governed by them, or occupy no longer than may be necessary a position which you think unfriendly to them

yr. etc A. J. D.

The President said he had read with much pain this letter, that I knew very well he would not part with his friend Majr Eaton, and that this was the object of those who did not allow their families to associate with Mrs. Eaton. I replied to him that whatever might be the views of others in regard to Majr Eaton that mine only looked to his fame and the protection of my own honor and character. That I had never seen any authority for his inference that a non intercourse with Mrs. Eaton was evidence of Political hostility to Majr. Eaton or himself.

The President continued. It is evidence of hostility to me. The refusal of my cabinet to associate with Mrs. E has already produced a coldness between several of them, which was daily exhibited. That he would not look to the cause of that coldness, but would at a proper time remove it by appointing officers that would harmonise in all their relations. I am, Sir, advised of the combinations which were formed in this city to keep Mrs. Eaton out of society, and the existence of similar ones at Nashville and elsewhere. They will fail. I shall never seperate from Majr. Eaton, no influence can ever force me to do it. The time is

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not far off when I will give the Gentlemen of my cabinet who cannot harmonise with Majr Eaton some honorable proofs of my confidence in new stations: vacancies will shortly take place in the corps of foreign ministers: they must take these or retire. I can do without them.

I replied to him: This will be a fatal step. It is that which your enemies are looking for. You have not a right to interfere with the private family relations of the cabinet, and the attempt to do it must be seriously injurious. It was to avoid such an imputation that I chiefly desired the return of Mrs. Donelson, whose absence had been already ascribed to his determination to coerce her into an intercourse with Mrs. Eaton.

He said. It was not true that he wished to coerce the intercourse, but that Mrs. D should not return until such intercourse could be maintained, or until she could be on the same terms with the families of all the Heads of Departments. That forty members of Congress during the past winter, understanding that the female part of his family and the ladies of the cabinet officers did not associate with Mrs. Eaton, had asked him if Genl Jackson was at the head of the Government, that this was the language of his friends every where. It was the language of truth, and he would shew the world that Genl Jackson was at the head of Government, that he would not put up with what Mr. Monroe did. he knew his duty and would produce harmony. He also spoke in bitter terms of Govr. Branch as having treated Majr. Eaton cruelly (I was struck with this remark as corresponding with one of Mr. Triste's in which he mentioned that Westcott said every body knew that Eaton appointed the cabinet,<sup>2</sup> and that Govr. Branch among other things was reproached with ingratitude to Majr Eaton—Mr. Triste so informed me to day. It may be proper also to state that Westcott has recently been foiled in an attempt to get his Brother a midshipman reinstated, is one of Mr. Van Buren's officers, and has been quite indecorous in his official intercourse with the Secretary of the Navy. I was stating my opinions of the error into which the President had fallen by not discriminating between the rights of society as it regarded the character of Mrs. Eaton, and his own, when we were interrupted by the appearance of Sent Smith.

2 On Branch's appointment see Bassett's *Jackson*, II. 414. See also p. 186n., *ante*.

*Nov. 13th.* On this day the Pennsylvania enquirer containing the proceedings of the dinner given to Col. Watmough was in the hands of the President when I entered his office. He had the day before authorised me to apprise Mr. Simpson of his determination to appoint him commissioner to distribute the indemnity which Denmark had agreed to pay to our claimants, if he would resign his clerkship under Mr Gerard who was a claimant. Simpson attended this dinner, has long been known to the President as a violent enemy of Mr. Ingham, and as a mortified candidate for office had in various ways exhibited his hostility to the Administration. The toasts will show that the sentiments of Mr Simpson were the prevailing ones at the dinner. The President read many of them in my presence. He did not seem to feel the slightest regret at the open assault which they made upon the character and services of Mr. Ingham but rather to acquiesce in it.

In relation to the inquiry which had been instituted at the Treasury Department into the charges which had been exhibited by Mr Gowan against Mr. Gwyn, and which were the subject of the most unfeeling remark at the dinner in question, the President expressed much discontent, and disclaimed any agency in it. I told him that he had certainly authorised it, and had given an order to Mr. Ingham to dismiss Mr. Gwyn if upon investigation he should find the charges substantiated. He answered that the subject ought not to have been presented by the Department—that Gowan had acted incorrectly, and should have fought it out without troubling the Government. These expressions were evidently much excited, and I could not account for them, until I reflected that Majr Lewis had left the room soon after I entered it. His known agency in the election which had resulted in the defeat of Mr. Miller by representing him as having lost the confidence of the Executive, which was the foundation of Mr. Gowans difficulty, readily explained the cause of the Presidents excitement, which did not stop here. He expressed his doubts of the sincerity of the counsels of Mr. Ingham, and a determination hereafter to be more guarded in his intercourse with him.

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It will be found that the President not only authorised the inquiry in question but on being informed that Mr. Gwyn had refused to answer to interrogatories touching one of the charges (alleging the want of power in the Government to question his exercise of the right he possessed to govern himself as he pleased as a voter), he the President directed Mr. Ingham specifically to prosecute the investigation in relation to this.

*Nov. 17th.* After the receipt of the letter of this date to me in which I am informed that I am at liberty to retire from the office of Private Secretary, I called upon the President to let him know the injustice he had done by the assertion that I represented myself and family as his guests. In my letter to him of the 30th of oct speaking of the duty which I owed his guests, I unfortunately thus expressed myself. "In your house, my dear Uncle, as your guest, I acknowledge that the same comity and politeness are due to Mrs. Eaton that is to the ladies of your other cabinet officers." He considered the term guest as applied to myself and family in his house, altho the whole subject forbid such an idea. The context shews clearly my meaning. But that there might be no misapprehension about it; I beg'd leave to correct the sentence so as to make it read as follows—"In your house, my dear Uncle, I acknowledge that the same comity and politeness are due from my family to Mrs. Eaton as your guest, that are due to the ladies of your other cabinet officers or those of other Gentlemen." After this no one can deny that the allegation that I had made an unfounded and ungenerous statement going to shew that Mrs. D and myself had been considered and treated by the President as his guests, is altogether erroneous. The President however admitted it verbally, but in writing will not acknowledge it. In conversation he will not reject the force of truth and honor. But in writing Mr. V and Mr. Lewis are his counsellors, and he will express no ideas that are not capable of perversion or material to the game which they have made the President play from the commencement of his disagreement with me, and which aims at my destruction.

He flew from the criminations of my conduct which are contained in his letter of the 16th; and indulged in observations upon the conduct of Mr. Ingham shewing that he

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is completely estranged from him. He also alluded to the Post office Department as obnoxious to the same influence which did not harmonise with his friend Majr. Eaton. said that he had written to Col. Powell and explained the conduct of Majr. Bary.<sup>3</sup>

3 William T. Barry, Postmaster General.

*Nov. 21st* The President handed me a letter from Col. Hamilton to him as well as one from the same Gentleman to myself. They both related to the removal of Majr. Laval by the city authorities of Charleston,<sup>4</sup> which had very highly excited the feeling of the States right party in which no doubt the friends of Genl Jackson were nearly all ranged. The object of the removal and the circumstance of its being effected thro' the agency of Mr. Pringle the collector whose influence was stated to have been used in such a manner as to make him obnoxious to the principles which the President had avowed in his Inaugural speech, formed the leading features in the letters of Col. Hamilton who had recommended the removal of Pringle and the appointment of Laval in his place. It became necessary for me to write such a letter in reply as the President would approve. This I did. After he read it, he said that Hamilton's indiscretion in this case was as great as that of Gowan's in Gwyn's: that both cases were directed by the influence of Mr. Calhoun whose hypocrisy and selfish ambition knew no limits, and would destroy his best friends to accomplish his purposes. He connected these incidents with the Watmough celebration, which he considered as a development of public sentiment which had been cherished by Calhoun and was designed to destroy Mr. Ingham for the purpose of reaching ultimately the President himself.

4 Meaning, their desire for his removal. Major Laval was reported a violent nullifier. He was still in the custom-house in 1832, and Poinsett, writing to Jackson on Nov. 16 of that year, suggested that Laval be transferred to New Orleans.

I told him that the influence which had gotten up the Watmough dinner was composed of disaffected men—men who had from the organization of his administration taken bold ground against it, and particularly against Mr. Ingham: and instanced Simpson and Jack

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as the leading spirits at the dinner. He said that Simpson was his friend—that the voice of his old friend called for his appointment, and he would obey it—that Mr. Ingham was becoming unpopular in Penna., and would fall a sacrifice to the intrigues of Calhoun—that Ganes was one of the puppets of the latter as was evinced by his letter to Watmough, and by his general deportment. He added other general remarks all pointing to a change in the cabinet, and such a change as would ensure harmony. A cabinet he said ought to be a unit; otherwise like the interests of a divided house it must fall. These views were followed by others denouncing Calhoun as having attempted to stab him in the dark. He mentioned a declaration of Mr. Ringgolds, the present marshal of the district, to Lewis, that Mr. Monroe resisted the inclination of Mr. Calhoun to arrest Genl Jackson for having transcended his orders in passing the Florida line—that Genl Jackson owed a great deal to Mr. Monroe etc. It ought to be stated here that Ringgold was interceding for Lewis favor and influence in behalf of Mr. Monroe's accounts against the Government, which are yet pending before Congress:<sup>5</sup> and that it is probable he saw no better plan than that of access to the Presidents prejudice against Calhoun. Lewis was a fit and is always a ready instrument in such an operation.

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to learn that this wretched intrigue to turn Jackson against Calhoun had its origin in Ringgold's effort to secure the payment of Monroe's claims against the government. For Major Lewis's unblushing acknowledgement of his part in it, see Parton's *Jackson*, III. 321–324. The reader will observe that Major Lewis puts the Ringgold revelation in November, 1829. Major Donelson says Jackson told him of it in November, 1830. Are we to suppose that Jackson kept the matter a secret from his nephew and confidential secretary for a whole year, or can it be that Lewis got the date wrong? Lewis wrote his account in 1859 and, seemingly, he wrote from memory.